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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 002529

SIPDIS

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TAGS: JO KISL PGOV PREL

SUBJECT: TENSE REGIONAL SITUATION INCREASES ELECTION UNCERTAINTY

REF: 01 AMMAN 03093

Classified By: AMBASSADOR EDWARD W. GNEHM FOR REASONS 1.5(B) AND (D).

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) Developments across the river and elsewhere in the region continue to place strong pressure on King Abdullah's reformist agenda. Along with the pressure, speculation concerning the status of parliamentary elections that were tentatively scheduled for the fall has grown. On May 10, Jordan's Prime Minister stated that a date for holding elections will be announced in July, unless extraordinary circumstances make elections "impossible." The Prime Minister did not comment on what might happen if elections are deemed impossible, and left open the possibility that the King might reinstate the former parliament. The general belief among Embassy contacts is that the GOJ will not hold elections this fall, though we are still being told by Jordanian officials that no decision has been made. End summary.

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THE PM HINTS AT POSTPONEMENT OF ELECTIONS . . . --

¶12. (C) Jordan's lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, was dissolved in June 2001. Following dissolution, the GOJ announced that it would hold elections requisite to forming a new parliament, but only after implementing new procedures called for in a July 2001 temporary elections law. The GOJ's central aim in amending the elections laws was to promote a moderate, pro-regime parliament - through redistricting, redistributing parliamentary seats, reforming voter registration mechanisms, and increasing representation from tribal areas where the Islamic Opposition has little support (reftel).

¶13. (U) Until recently, the GOJ had indicated that elections would be held in fall 2002 and it appeared that announcement of a date could be imminent. However, rumors to the contrary have been circulating for some time. This skepticism became all the stronger when, on May 10, Prime Minister Ali Abul Ragheb told the London-based daily Al Quds Al Arabi that the GOJ will not announce a date until July. Abul Ragheb said the GOJ will prepare to conduct elections by the end of the year, but acknowledged that "extraordinary regional circumstances" could yet make elections impossible. When asked if the old parliament might be reinstated, Abul Ragheb noted that this prerogative rests with the King. Abul Ragheb again addressed the elections topic during a May 20 meeting with the Ambassador. According to the Prime Minister, the GOJ will monitor the internal political situation in May and June, and make a decision on elections in July. He hoped that development projects coming on line in June as well as the anticipated Middle East peace conference would produce more favorable conditions for elections.

¶14. (C) Abul Ragheb's reference to "extraordinary regional circumstances" clearly encompasses the situation on the West Bank and the possibility of a U.S. offensive against Iraq, both of which bolster sympathy for the Islamic viewpoint. As a former parliamentarian representing Madaba puts it, the Islamic Opposition is enjoying a growing surge of support generated by the perception that Islam alone can offer deliverance from vexing regional issues. (Comment: Equally to the point, even many people who have no use for the Islamists' program would be tempted to cast protest votes.) He and other former parliamentarians parrot the popular belief that the GOJ will be loath to lock in strong Islamist parliamentary representation - and thereby allow a primary purpose of the new elections law to be defeated - by holding elections at a time when Islamist influence is unusually strong.

AND THE CONSTITUTION MAY PERMIT POSTPONEMENT

¶15. (C) The GOJ may end up foregoing elections on grounds that "extraordinary regional circumstances" prevent them. Under the Constitution, when "a force majeure has occurred which . . . render(s) the holding of elections impossible," a new

Chamber of Deputies does not have to be elected. The King can (but is not required to) in these circumstances reinstate the former parliament. If this were to happen, the former parliament would resume its activities as if at the beginning of an election cycle, though the King would retain his normal prerogative to dissolve parliament at any time. If the conditions rendering the holding of elections impossible were to abate without reinstatement of the old parliament, a new parliament would have to be elected following abatement.

BUT THERE IS BROAD SUPPORT FOR THE RESTORATION OF PARLIAMENT
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16. (C) We believe that there is broad support among the public for the restoration of a functioning parliament. Indeed, as a prominent human rights contact points out, regional tensions make a functioning parliament more important than it otherwise would be. But the consensus among several Embassy contacts is also that the most legitimate way of restoring parliament would be through holding elections, because conditions preventing elections do not genuinely exist. One contact, a University of Jordan law professor, explains that regional (as opposed to domestic) circumstances cannot - under well-settled legal principles - provide a basis for declaring a force majeure in the first place. Another contact, the head of the El Urdon El Jadid "think tank," also believes regional instability should not provide a basis for declaring a force majeure because instability in this region is endemic.

17. (C) Many Embassy contacts believe the GOJ will reinstate the old parliament as a means of averting election of a strong Islamist block in a new parliament, though they view the fear of Islamist "overrepresentation" as overblown. Some believe Islamists will not fare particularly well under the procedures established by the temporary elections law (i.e., a common prediction is that Islamists will only capture 15-20 of 104 seats), and that the composition of the new parliament will be more representative and democratic under the new law.

Another view is that strong Islamist representation in parliament is actually desirable to some degree because it will carry with it an increased resolve to battle government corruption and promote other important causes. On the other hand, one former parliamentarian from rural Tafileh believes the GOJ has reason to worry that sustained economic difficulties are severely eroding tribal support for the regime.

AND THE ISLAMISTS WANT POLLS NOW

18. (C) Members of the Islamic opposition - who believe they have the most to gain in elections - want elections as quickly as possible. Islamic Action Front (IAF) Secretary General Hamza Mansour opposes "any new postponement or bringing back the dissolved parliament." The Muslim Brotherhood has likewise gone on record "reiterat(ing) the importance of maintaining a democratic process" by holding elections this year. Nonetheless, the IAF has said it will defer a decision on whether to participate in elections until after the GOJ sets a polling date. According to one former parliamentarian who was also a member of the IAF, deep internal divisions underlie the decision to defer commitment on this point. Though the Islamic Opposition's parliamentary elections boycott prevented it from taking any seats in 1997, regional developments have added resonance to calls from within the Opposition to again forego participation.

COMMENT

19. (C) As long as the GOJ maintains the position that "extraordinary regional circumstances" constitute a force majeure, it can claim that the Constitution relieves it of any obligation to elect a new parliament, and it can continue without a functioning parliament or by reinstating the old one. It is difficult to reliably predict which course the King will ultimately choose. No matter how much the King may want to hold elections, he will have to balance this against the risk that elections could result in a conservative or Islamist parliament opposed to his reformist agenda. In the meantime, we expect rumors about the elections - and the government reshuffle that might go with a decision to postpone - to continue going the rounds with infinite variations. End comment.

Gnehm